

# Task-Based Learning and the 2003 Action Plan: An analysis of tasks designed by senior high school Japanese teachers of English.



Gregory C. Birch

Seisen Jogakuin College

## Introduction

Between 2003 and 2007, all Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) were to attend mandatory in-service training as specified in the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's (MEXT) 2003 Action Plan (MEXT, 2003b). One of the stated goals for the training was the improvement of English teachers' ability to cultivate students' communication abilities. This research focuses on the training program in a prefecture in which the Action Plan's goals were interpreted as teaching English through English (TETE) and task-based learning (TBL). I explored the TETE component of the program in a previous paper (Birch 2012); the focus of this paper is TBL. Specifically, I present an analysis of TBL lesson plans designed by senior high school Japanese teachers of English (SHS JTEs) for the training. The analysis shows i) how TBL was interpreted for the Japanese context by the teacher trainers; and ii) the nature of understanding SHS JTEs have of TBL.

## The 2003 Action Plan

The 2003 Action Plan focused primarily on the promotion of pedagogy through which "the majority of an English class will be conducted in English and many activities where students can communicate in English will be introduced" (MEXT, 2003b). These goals were to be realized through intensive in-service training. MEXT training program guidelines (MEXT, 2003a) suggested tasks as one type of viable communicative activity, relying primarily on Skehan (1996b) and Willis (1996) for defining, justifying and describing categories of tasks.

## The Training Program: Overview

The training seminar in question consisted of a one-day orientation in May and a five-day intensive seminar in August. The training seminar was designed by four university professors in conjunction with a Board of Education teacher consultant, all of whom were Japanese. In the orientation session, participants heard introductory lectures on TETE and TBL, observed a demonstration lesson, and were assigned reading. The TBL element of the reading was Shiokawa, Sakai, and Urano (2005). In preparation for August, participants were expected to implement ideas from the orientation into their classes and prepare two lesson plans, one for each focus: TETE and TBL. Day one of the intensive summer session was

devoted to TBL. It started with a description of the program goals and a 20-minute review of the May Orientation TBL lecture. In the next session, teachers in groups discussed and demonstrated the lesson plans they had prepared individually and one member from each group introduced his/her plan in the afternoon. The teacher trainers did not see the lesson plans before the training, nor many of the demonstrations given in small groups. Day two concentrated on TETE, day three included demonstration lessons performed by past participants and day four was set aside for preparation of a demonstration lesson to be given on the last day. Participants also heard lectures on other topics, including CALL, during the training. For a detailed program description, see Birch (2012).

### Task Definition

The task definition used in the training (Table 1) was primarily based on Nunan (1989) and Skehan (1996a).

Task completion was considered more important than accurate language use. For example, students can choose what language to use as “there is no target grammatical item in a task” (Shiokawa, Sakai, & Urano, 2005, p.126). Furthermore, reference was made to monitoring learner language and addressing student errors in the post-task phase, reinforcing an incidental focus on form rather than a pre-determined one. In other words, only unfocused tasks (Ellis, 2009, p. 223) were

introduced. Although participants observed a number of demonstrations, there was no discussion of or reference to different task types.

### Method

Data was collected in the final year of the program, in which the author served as a teacher trainer. 27 lesson plans containing tasks that SHS JTES prepared after the May input were analyzed. The tasks were analyzed according to the task criteria (Table 1) and implementation guidelines provided in the training and categorized according to the task types (Willis, 1996, p. 26-28) referred to in MEXT guidelines (2003a). The task categories were as follows: *listing, ordering / sorting, comparing, problem solving, sharing personal experiences and other*. The criteria, implementation guidelines and task types were interpreted and adapted by the Japanese teacher trainers and MEXT for use in Japan.

To ensure the accuracy of my analysis, the lesson plans and criteria were provided to a fellow teacher trainer and our results compared. Other areas examined include the amount of time devoted to a task (to determine how central tasks were to the lesson), whether the task was related to a textbook (to see if tasks were an integral part of the curriculum), the presence of an Assistant English Teacher (AET), the degree to which student performance was evaluated, and the inclusion of a worksheet which, while not a requirement, helped

Table 1: Task Criteria (Shiokawa, Sakai, & Urano, 2005)

Task Criteria
• Focus is primarily on meaning
• Clear goal
• Comparable to real-life task
• Requires students to use English
• Students can choose what language to use

clarify how a task was implemented.

An example analysis is presented here using the May orientation demonstration lesson. In this lesson, students considered how Ken can comfort his hospitalized mother. Participants observed how to provide students with rich input in the pre-task phase (another goal of the training), implement a ranking task and incorporate task repetition (see Bygate, 1996). In task 1, students rank five suggestions the JTE provides for comforting Ken's mother, choose the best idea and add a suggestion. In task 2, students give their suggestion in written form. In the post-task phase, the JTE chooses the best suggestions and comments briefly. In terms of task characteristics, the task is *meaning-focused*, *goal-oriented* and *comparable to a real-life task*, but one could argue the degree of *student control* was limited. It is unlikely students could generate news ideas in their own words after hearing and ranking five suggestions. On the other hand, this may provide the necessary scaffolding for *target language use*, which was particularly important since junior high school teachers were also in attendance. Even though I observed the demonstration lesson, tried the lesson with my students, and discussed the results with another trainer, the analysis of the lesson plan was not straightforward. Analyzing the participants' lesson plans was equally challenging.

## Results

The analysis provided a picture of general tendencies and an understanding of the individual tasks, the contexts in which they were used and their implementation. Here, only the most salient results are presented.

- Tasks were comprehensively integrated into the curriculum: half of the class (24-minute average) was devoted to tasks; all tasks (except one) were related to the textbook; and most (75%) were based on a reading passage.
- Limited target language use: Half of

the tasks could be completed with little spoken target language use since the most common types, 11 out of 23 tasks, were receptive tasks requiring listing, ordering, and sorting. Some teachers did not limit themselves to one type. Some tasks fell into two categories. In one example, students had to categorize behavior as polite or impolite, and then compare their answers with the AET's.

- Teachers relied heavily on examples from the training. Three ranking tasks and two categorizing tasks were similar to the May demo lesson and others showed similar implementation (e.g., task repetition). Furthermore, the most common problem-solving task was predicting a story's ending (4), but three examples came from one school where it is possible that one teacher shared her idea.

“TBL was introduced as an activity to supplement a lesson, rather than as a methodology in which tasks serve as the central pedagogic unit”

## Discussion

TBL was introduced as an activity to supplement a lesson, rather than as a methodology in which tasks serve as the central pedagogic unit. This focus may be appropriate given the amount of time devoted to TBL in the training. Fortunately, participants were exposed to a number of

good tasks and demonstrations. However, some participants received little feedback. For example, the trainers did not see many of the demonstrations given in small groups, nor did they see the lesson plans in advance of the training. If they had, they might have been able to introduce a wider range of tasks and note excellent examples, such as a sharing personal experiences task, which made excellent use of scaffolding (e.g., use of mind maps to exemplify the process), demonstrating that tasks can be used with students of low proficiency. With respect to task implementation, only half of the participants included a worksheet with their lesson plan. Perhaps teachers would have focused more on this important aspect if worksheets had been a requirement.

## Conclusion

This research described how TBL was interpreted for the Japanese context through examination of a training program stemming from MEXT's 2003 Action Plan. Based on an analysis of the lectures, demonstration lesson, assigned reading and lesson plans, it appears tasks were introduced as an activity to supplement a reading passage. While one focus of the training was to develop students' communicative ability, many tasks could be completed with limited spoken target language use. With more input and feedback, this could have been addressed. On the other hand, it appears that a limited number of good examples were imitated successfully, indicating the training was beneficial.

## About the author

Gregory Birch, an Associate Professor at Seisen Jogakuin College in Nagano, Japan, holds a MSc Degree in TESOL from Aston University and a MA in Japanese Language and Society from Sheffield University. His current research focus is in-service teacher training for Japanese teachers of English. He

has also presented and written articles on Task-Based Learning, and the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme.

## References

- Birch, G. (2012). Mandatory in-service training for Japanese teachers of English: A case study. *English Language Teacher Education and Development*, 14, 16-24.
- Bygate, M. (1996). Effects of task repetition: appraising the developing language of learners. In J. Willis and D. Willis (Eds.), *Challenges and change in language teaching* (pp. 136-146). Oxford: Heinemann.
- Ellis, R. (2009). Task-based language teaching: Sorting out the misunderstandings. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 19(3), 221-246.
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology. (2003a). *Eigo ga tsukaeru nihon jin no ikusei no tame no eigo kyouin kenshuu gaidobukku*. [The English Teachers Training Guidebook for Cultivating Japanese with English Abilities] Tokyo.
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology. (2003b). *Regarding the establishment of an action plan to cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities."* Retrieved from [www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/03072801.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/03072801.htm)
- Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shiokawa, H., Sakai, H., & Urano, K. (2005). Tasks in English language teaching. *Gakuen Ronshu*, 123, 123-137.
- Skehan, P. (1996a). A framework for the implementation of task-based instruction. *Applied Linguistics*, 17(1), 38-62.
- Skehan, P. (1996b). Second language acquisition research and task-based instruction. In J. Willis and D. Willis (Eds.), *Challenges and change in language teaching* (pp. 17-30). Oxford: Heinemann.
- Willis, J. (1996). *A Framework for Task-Based Learning*. Harlow: Longman.